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In China, Rock's Kingdom

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By BRUCE CHATWIN

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And over Li Chiang, the snow range is turquoise Rock's world that he saved us for memory a thin trace in high air -- EZRA POUND, "CANTO CXIII"

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It is a cold, sunny Sunday in Yun-nan. On the plain below Jade Dragon Mountain, the villagers of Beisha are letting off firecrackers to celebrate the building of a house, and the village doctor is holding a feast in his upper room, in honor of his firstborn grandson.

The sun filters through the lattices, bounces off rafters hung with corncobs and lights up everyone's faces. Apart from us, almost all the guests are members of the Nakhi tribe.

The Nakhi are the descendants of Tibetan nomads who, many centuries ago, exchanged their tents for houses and settled in the Lijiang Valley, to grow rice and buckwheat at an altitude of over 8,000 feet. Their religion was - and surreptitiously still is - a combination of Tibetan Lamaism, Chinese Taoism and a far, far older shamanistic belief: in the spirits of cloud and wind and pine.

The Doctor has seated us, with his four brothers, at the table of honor beside the east window.

Below, along the street, there are lines of weeping willows and a quickwater stream in which some pale brown ducks are playing. Led by the drake, they swim furiously against the current, whiz back down to the bridge and then begin all over again.

The paneled housefronts are painted the color of ox blood. Their walls are of mud brick, flecked with chaff, and their tiled roofs stretch away, rising and sagging, in the direction of the old dynastic temple of the ancient kings of Mu.

None of the Doctor's brothers look the least bit alike. The most vigorous is a leathery, Mongol-eyed peasant, who keeps refilling my bowl of firewater. The second, with bristly gray hair and a face of smiling wrinkles, sits immobile as a meditating monk. The other two are a tiny man with a wandering gaze and a shadowy presence under a fur-lined hat.

Looking across to the ladies' table, we are amazed by the full-fleshed, dimpled beauty of the young girls and the quiet dignity of the older women. They are all in traditional costume, in the celestial colors - blue and white. Some, it is true, are wearing Mao caps, but most are in a curved blue bonnet, rather like a Flemish coif. Our Shanghai friend, Tsong-Zong, says we might well be guests at Bruegel's "Peasant Wedding."

Apart from the bonnet, the women's costume consists of a blue bodice, a pleated white apron and a stiff, quilted cape secured with crossbands. Every Nakhi woman carries the

cosmos on her back: the upper part of the cape is a band of indigo representing the night sky; the lower, a lobe of creamy silk or sheepskin that stands for the light of day. The two halves are separated by a row of seven disks that symbolize the stars - although the sun and moon, once worn on either shoulder, have now gone out of fashion.

Girls come up from the kitchen with the sweet course: apples preserved in honey, melon in ginger, sour plums in alcohol. More girls then come with the "Nine Dishes" - the "Nine Dragons," as they've been called since the Chou dynasty: in this case, cubes of pork fat and winter sausage, water chestnuts, lotus root, carp, taros, bean tops, rice fritters, a fungus known as tree ears, and a heap of tripe and antique eggs that go, like sulfur bombs, straight to the gut.

From time to time, the Doctor himself appears at the head of the stairs, in a white clinician's mobcap and silver-gray cotton greatcoat. He surveys the company with the amused, slightly otherworldly air of a Taoist gentleman-scholar, and flicks his wispy beard from side to side. As soon as the meal is over, he appears again, hypodermic in hand, as if to remind us that healing, even on this "Big Happy Day," is a work without end.

The grandson's name is Te-Sho: "Te" for virtue, "Sho" for longevity. On a sheet of red paper, now pinned to the porch, the old man has written the following:

The grandfather grants his grandson the name "Te-Sho." Te is high as the Big Dipper. Sho is like the southern mountain. Te is valued by the world. Sho respected by men. Te is an oily rain. Sho the fertilized field. Long life and health to him, born 10:30 A.M., 9th Moon, 14th Day.

The focus of all this adoration is swaddled in a length of gold-and-purple Tibetan brocade, and has the face of a man born wise. He is on show downstairs, in his mother's lap. The bedroom has white-papered walls to which are pasted scarlet cutouts of characters representing happiness and of butterflies flying in pairs.

Apart from the Doctor's herbal and his English dictionary, the swaddling clothes are the family's only treasure to survive the Cultural Revolution, when Red Guards ransacked the house.

The Doctor takes the baby and cradles him in his arms.

"I have plenty," he says, gesturing to the revelers in the courtyard. "Six years ago I had nothing. But now I have plenty." His wife comes from the kitchen and stands beside him. And with her deep blue bonnet, and smile of tender resignation, she reminds us of Martha or Mary in a Florentine altarpiece.

The Red Guards stripped him of everything, and he was forbidden to practice. "It was she who saved me," he says. "Without her I could not have lived." Their son, the father of three weeks' standing, is a young man of 27 in a neat blue Chinese suit. He is a self-taught teacher of English, and now also a student of medicine.

Proudly, he shows us his wedding cup - a porcelain bowl painted with peacocks, on which the village calligrapher has added a couplet by the Tang poet Pai-ju-li:

*One only wishes that people will live forever
And be in couples even at a distance of 1,000 li*

The calligrapher - a courteous, hook-nosed old gentleman - is the Doctor's cousin and also one of the party. He has spent many years, as an ideological bygone, in jail. But now - in this new, relaxed, undoctinaire China - he has retired to his tiny house by the stream: to practice the arts of seal cutting, brushwork and the culture of orchids. On Tuesday, when

we called on him, he showed us a lilac autumn crocus, with a label in Chinese reading "Italian autumn narcissus."

The Doctor, too, is a passionate plant collector, though of a rather different stamp. Behind his surgery is a garden with paths of pebble-mosaic where a plum tree casts its shadow, like a sundial, on the whitewashed walls, and there are raised beds for growing medicinal herbs. Most of the herbs he has gathered himself, from the slopes of the Snow Range: heaven's hemp (for the bladder); orchid root (for migraine); *Meconopsis horridula* (for dysentery), and a lichen that will cure shrunken ovaries, or bronchitis if taken with bear's grease.

He owes much of his botanical knowledge to his student days in Nanjing. But some he learned from the strange, solitary European - with red face, spectacles and a terrible temper - who taught him his first smattering of English; at whom, as his retinue passed up the village street, the boys would clamor: "Le-Ke! Le-Ke!" - "Rock! Rock!" - and scamper out of reach.

Joseph F. Rock - "Dr. Lock" as the Nakhi remember him - was the Austro-American botanist and explorer who lived in the Lijiang Valley, off and on from 1922 to 1949. He is our excuse for coming here. My interest in him goes back many years to a summer evening in the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, when I found that all the trees I liked best bore Rock's name on their labels.

"Tell me," the Doctor asked on a previous visit, "Why was Le-Ke so angry with us?"

"He wasn't angry with you," I said. "He was born angry." I should perhaps have added that the targets of his anger included the National Geographic magazine (for rewriting his prose), his Viennese nephew, Harvard University, women, the State Department, the Kuomintang, Reds, red tape, missionaries, Holy Rollers, Chinese bandits and bankrupt Western civilization.

Rock was the son of an Austrian manservant who ended up as major-domo to a Polish nobleman, Count Potocki. His mother died when he was 6. At 13, already under the spell of an imaginary Cathay, he taught himself Chinese characters. I like to think that, from the library of his father's employer, he read, and acted on, an 18th-century Count Potocki's novel of aristocrats in far-flung places: "The Saragossa Manuscript."

Tuberculosis notwithstanding, young Rock ran away to sea: to Hamburg, to New York, to Honolulu - where, without training, he set himself up as the botanist of the Hawaiian Islands. He wrote three indispensable books on the flora, then went to Burma in search of a plant to cure leprosy. He "discovered" Lijiang, thereafter to be the base for his travels along the Tibetan border: to the former kingdoms of Muli, Choni and Yungning, and to the mountain of Minya Konka, which, in a moment of rashness, he claimed to be the highest in the world. (He had miscalculated by about a mile.) Yet, though he introduced hundreds of new or rare plants to Western gardens and sent off thousands and thousands of herbarium specimens, he never wrote a paper on the botany of China.

Instead, he gave his life to recording the customs, ceremonies and the unique pictographic script of his Nakhi friends. Lijiang was the only home he ever knew; and after he was booted out, he could still write, in a letter, "I want to die among those beautiful mountains rather than in a bleak hospital bed all alone."

This, then, was the meticulous autodidact, who would pack "David Copperfield" in his baggage to remind him of his wretched childhood; who traveled "en prince" (at the expense of his American backers), ate off gold plate, played records of Caruso to mountain villagers and liked to glance back, across a hillside, at his cavalcade "half a mile long."

His book "The Ancient Na-Khi Kingdom of South-West China," with its eye-aching genealogies and dazzling asides, must be one of the most eccentric publications ever produced by the Harvard University Press.

Here is a stretch of his embattled prose:

"A short distance beyond, at a tiny temple, the trail ascends the red hills covered with oaks, pines, *Pinus Armandi*, *P. yunnanensis*, *Alnus*, *Castanopsis Delavayi*, rhododendrons, roses, *Berberis*, etc., up over limestone mountains, through oak forest, to a pass with a few houses called Ch'ou-shui-ching (Stinking water well). At this place many hold-ups and murders were committed by the bandit hordes of Chang Chieh-pa. He strung up his victims by the thumbs to the branches of high trees, and tied rocks to their feet; lighting a fire beneath he left them to their fate. It was always a dreaded pass for caravans. At the summit there are large groves of oaks (*Quercus Delavayi*) . . ."

No wonder Ezra Pound adored it!

Pound appears to have got hold of Rock's "Na-Khi Kingdom" in 1956, at a time when he was locked up as a lunatic in St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington; from it, he extrapolated the upland paradise that was to be, in effect, his lifeline.

Over the last week we have been walking the roads of Lijiang country and finding, to our delight, that the world Rock "saved us for memory" - to say nothing of Ezra Pound's borrowings - is very far from dead.

At Rock's former lodgings in Lijiang town, we have seen his bookcase, his pigeonhole desk, his wide chair ("because he was so fat!") and the remains of his garden beside the Jade Stream.

At Nuluko (the name means "the foot of the silver cliffs") his country house is almost as he left it, except that, instead of herbarium specimens, the porch is spread with drying turnip tops. The present occupant, Li Wen Biao, was one of Rock's muleteers; he showed us the master's camp bed and the washhouse where he would set up a canvas bath from Abercrombie & Fitch.

We have been to Tiger Leaping Gorge and seen the cliff line plummeting 11,000 feet into the Yangtze. We have watched the Nakhi women coming down from the Snow Range, with their bundles of pine and artemisia; and one old woman with a bamboo winnowing basket on her back, and the sun's rays passing through it:

Artemisia Arundinaria Winnowed in fate's tray . . . - "CANTO CXII"

The wild pear trees are scarlet in the foothills, the larches like golden pagodas; the north slopes "blue-green with juniper." The last of the gentians are in flower, and flocks of black sheep brindle the plain.

When the stag drinks at the salt spring and sheep come down with the gentian sprout, . . . - "CANTO CX"

One evening, walking back to town across the fields, I came on a boy and girl reading aloud beside the embers of a fire. Their book was a traditional Chinese romance and, on its open page, there was a picture of Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy.

The Nakhi are a passionate people, and even today, rather than submit to a hated marriage, young lovers may poison or drown themselves, or jump to their death from the mountain.

At the Nakhi Institute in Lijiang, we were shown a pair of pine saplings, adorned like

Christmas trees, commemorating two people who killed themselves for love. Rock wrote that such suicides become "wind-spirits," reminding Pound of Dante's Paolo and Francesca, whose shades were "so light on the wind," and who, readers of the "Inferno" will remember, fell in love while reading a romance of chivalry.

At Shigu, where the Yangtze takes a hairpin bend, we have seen the Stone Drum: by the waters of Stone Drum, the two aces . . . - "CANTO CI"

The drum is a cylinder of marble in a pavilion by the willows. The "aces" refers to two Chinese generals - one lost in legend, the other of the Ming dynasty, whose victory is recorded on the drum itself. Our friend Tzong-Zong raised his hand to the surface and rattled off the characters:

*Snowflakes the size of a hand Rain joining sunset to sunset The wind quick as arrows . . .
Commands quick as lightning
And the bandits loose their gall . . .
Their black flag falls to the earth . . .
They run for their lives . . .
Heads heaped like grave mounds Blood like rain . . .
The dikes choked with armor and rattan shields The trail of foxes and the trail of jackals
Have vanished from the battlefield . . .*

Rock wrote of a tradition that, should the Stone Drum split, a catastrophe will fall on the country. About 15 years ago, some Red Guards did, indeed, split it. (It has since been stuck together.) We wondered if, secretly, the iconoclasts had seen the foxes and jackals in themselves.

We have listened to a Nakhi orchestra that in the bad years would practice in secret: on a stringless lute, a muffled drum and a flute turned at a right angle to the mouthpiece.

In the hills above Rock's village is the Jade Dragon Monastery, Yufeng Si, where we have sat with the lama hearing him tell how he would sneak into the monastery at night, on pain of prison or worse, to save the 500-year camellia that stretches, trained on a trellis, around the temple court.

Of all the places we have seen, the monastery seems the loveliest. But this is what Rock had to say of it: "It is the home of rats, whose excrements lie inches deep . . . dangerous to visit . . . books wrapped in dusty silks . . . the most forlorn and forsaken lamasery I know of."

Also paying his respects to the lama was the Regional Commissioner for Monuments. I asked him about the horribly battered temple, dating from the Tang dynasty, which we could see in the valley below. It is dedicated to the mountain god, Saddo, lord of the Snow Range and protector from calamities.

The Commissioner answered, emphatically: "The restoration will begin next month," as if also to say that the world's oldest, subtlest, most intelligent civilization has now returned to the sources of its ancient wisdom.

In the village of Beisha, around the corner from the Doctor's house, there is another, smaller temple, its garden desolate, its cypresses fallen, its balustrades smeared with graffiti: "Confess and we will be lenient!"

Here, under Taoist symbols of the Eternal Return, the Red Guards set up their so-called courts. Yet it occurred to us that these ill-tempered scrawls were not, after all, so distant from the spirit of the "Tao-te-ching" of Lao-tze:

How did the great rivers and seas gain dominion over the hundred lesser streams? By being lower than they.

The sun goes down behind the mountain, and we must, finally, say goodbye to the Doctor. He is anxious to give me from his pharmacy a plant with the windblown name of "Saussurea gossipiphora," which only grows on the snow line. Soon, he hopes to leave his practice in the care of his son and be free to gather herbs in the mountains. He lifts his eyes to Jade Dragon Peak and, suddenly, in his silver greatcoat, becomes the living image of my favorite upland traveler, the poet Li Po (as he appears in later pictures):

*You ask me why I live in the gray hills.
I smile but do not answer; for my thoughts are elsewhere.
Like peach petals carried by the stream, they have gone
To other climates, to countries other than the world of men.*

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